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OFFICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH • Center for Health Policy, Information & Promotion

Bioterrorism for the Public

# FAQ's - Anthrax

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## **What is anthrax?**

Anthrax is a serious disease that can affect both animals and humans. It is caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. The bacteria form spores, or protective coverings, and can live in soil for many years. When the spores enter a human or animal (through breaks in the skin, through ingestion, or through inhalation) the spores produce bacteria that can grow and multiply.

People can get anthrax from contact with infected animals, wool, meat, or hides, or from contact with soil containing spores. In its most common form, anthrax is a skin disease that causes skin ulcers and usually fever and fatigue. Up to 20% of these cases are fatal if untreated. Anthrax may also cause gastrointestinal disease if it is ingested (swallowed).

When *B. anthracis* is inhaled, as when used as a biological weapon, it is much more serious. The first symptoms may include a sore throat, mild fever and muscle aches. Within several days these symptoms are followed by severe breathing problems, shocks, and often meningitis (inflammation of the brain and spinal cord covering). Once the severe symptoms appear, this form of anthrax is almost always fatal. None of these forms of anthrax has been shown to spread from person to person.

## **How common is anthrax?**

Anthrax occurs in animals all over the world, most commonly in countries that have poor livestock public health programs, but also in the U.S. Occasionally cutaneous (skin) anthrax is reported in the U.S. in people who have contact with infected animals. Gastrointestinal and inhalational anthrax are extremely rare and result from ingestion or inhalation of anthrax spores.

## **What is anthrax vaccine?**

Anthrax vaccine protects against anthrax disease. The vaccine used in the U.S. does not contain bacterial cells and can not cause anthrax disease. Information about the vaccine's effectiveness is limited, but it is believed to protect against the cutaneous and inhalational forms of the disease.

## **Who gets anthrax vaccine?**

In the U.S., distribution of the vaccine is controlled by the Department of Defense. Vaccine is routinely given only to military personnel.

## **Could I get vaccinated if anthrax was released?**

The availability of anthrax vaccine during an outbreak is a decision that would be made by federal officials. Factors to consider would be the number of persons potentially exposed and the availability of antibiotics for treatment or prevention of illness. The federal government has already prepared for bioterrorist events involving bacterial agents by stockpiling antibiotics for emergency use.

**For further information on Anthrax go to:** <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/Agent/Anthrax/Anthrax.asp>